

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY: NEW TASKS

Among the reasons why the study of the classics is supposed to become increasingly useless, the argument recurs again and again that there is hardly anything new to be discovered and said in the realm of antiquity; the field of ancient literature has been ploughed over so often since the great centuries of humanism that its fruitfulness is nearly exhausted.

This impression results from various facts. In the first place the body of extant Greek and Latin texts has not substantially changed for many generations. What has been added and what still may be added here and there can hardly be called more than a supplement to the already existing body and has not revolutionised or essentially increased our knowledge. (There seems to remain but one possibility to widen our knowledge in a basic manner: the recovery of libraries of the Greek classics assumed to be buried under the lava of Herculaneum. But under the prevailing conditions decades may pass before we shall know more about this possibility.) Moreover, not only the material itself but even its interpretation has apparently remained unaltered since time immemorial. The humanist tradition—especially as it was cultivated in the secondary schools—

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produced an ideal of antiquity which in the course of time took on the character of a rigid formula. And finally it is hardly surprising that the pace at which the historical sciences (in the widest sense) developed should be compared to the pace of the natural sciences. This comparison, as a matter of course, works entirely in favour of the natural sciences. If we compare our time with that of Rousseau or Voltaire, our impression, at least at a first glance, is that the historical sciences fall far short of the advancement which has been so conspicuously achieved in the field of the natural sciences.

Still, the assertion that there was nothing really worthwhile doing in the study of the classics is simply wrong. This assertion derives from a misconception about the very nature of historical existence and from ignorance of both the methods used and the problems recognised as legitimate by contemporary students of antiquity. It may therefore be useful by way of outline and specific illustration to present some of these problems as the student of the classics faces them today. And since it is impossible to speak at this place about the whole field of the classics, we shall discuss that part which—together with the history of poetry—may be called the very core of the classics: the history of ancient philosophy.

We shall proceed from the fact that ancient philosophy is part of ancient history and hence partakes of the very nature of historical existence.

The decisive quality of the present state of classical science is a degree of certainty of historical consciousness never attained by previous generations. This means an awareness that every event in history is necessarily rooted in the particular time from which it has grown forth, that it bears the stigmata of its epoch, but that it also forms an irreplaceable link in the endless concatenation of cause and effect. This may be illustrated by two examples.

Many works of the most eminent ancient philosophers have come down to us but in the form of small and casual quotations preserved by later authors; thus for instance the book of the famous obscure Heraclitus of Ephesus. Previous generations of scholars have simply excerpted these quotations and have attempted to interpret them as they were and on their own ground. This kind of interpretation was only assisted by the more or less profound intuition of the respective scholar; the result was sometimes a highly romantic, pompous, or even sensational presentation of the teachings of that ancient philosopher. In part these impressive and dazzlingly coloured portraits of a Thales, Heraclitus, Protagoras, Socrates, or others have survived even in the most recent publications. However, we know

today that this is a false approach. Our interpretation of a fragment of a philosopher has to follow procedures that are no less sharply defined than those of a chemical analysis. When, for instance, we encounter a quotation of a pre-Socratic writer in the work of a late author, our first task is to find out on the basis of the available manuscript the exact reading of the late author. This is to tell us in what form he himself had found the quotation. Our next question is: from what source did the late author take the quotation and to what purpose did he use it. A number of problems ensue directly: is the text of the pre-Socratic writer, as read and quoted by the late author, identical with the text as it was written by the pre-Socratic writer himself, or is there some cause for suspecting that the text has been altered—for the purpose of modernising the language, widening the contents, reducing the size, or even forgery? What is the meaning of the words used in the quotation? And this in turn means: what, in the first place, could have been their significance for the pre-Socratic and for his readers; secondly, what could they have meant for the late author and his readers; and finally, how are these two meanings related to one another? In ancient philosophy terminology played an unusually important role. Modern philologists are inclined to start from the assumption that each philosopher possessed his particular and sometimes even consciously and arbitrarily selected terminology. It is the task of the scholar to bring out the authentic meaning of this terminology as well as to trace the most important shifts of meaning which the various terms have undergone in the course of the centuries. Eventually we have to integrate the total meaning of a quotation of that sort into the knowledge we have of the environment in which it was originally conceived. This last step is the most decisive and at the same time the most dangerous one. There will always lurk the temptation of interpreting a philosophical text in the light of problems that were of concern to a subsequent or even to our own time, whereas at least one rule ought to be respected unconditionally: any text of an ancient philosopher must be understood as the philosopher himself and the readers for whom he wrote did understand it. In concrete terms this means that we ought to see the philosopher strictly in the place which *he* assumes in the evolution of philosophical problems; that is, we have to see a Heraclitus under the aspect of the 'predecessors' with whom he has taken issue—the Milesians, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and Hecataeus; and also under the aspect of his immediate 'successors' who in turn took issue with him.

Or let us take Plato: practically all of his works have come down to us;

nevertheless, they may be interpreted in the most divergent ways. Who or what will provide us with the authentic understanding of Plato? Not indeed some enthusiastic inspiration which makes us discover our own problems in the dark words of the poet-philosopher, but only the most scrupulous scientific interpretation of the text guided by the question: what did the author himself mean by each sentence, and what could the reader (that is, the educated fourth-century Greek—not we) understand by it. Many a superfluous and fantastic discussion could have been spared had this maxim always been followed. Where the interpretation of Plato's text leaves us in the dark there remains this alternative: to connect Plato with the philosophy from which he starts—usually called the philosophy of the sophists—and with the philosophy which in turn takes its point of departure from him—the philosophy of Xenocrates and Aristotle. Finally, there is the possibility of fitting Plato into the context of his philosophising contemporaries, that is, the Socratics.

The task of drawing an accurate picture of the development of ancient philosophy has been solved only to a small extent. One may state without exaggeration that the main job remains to be done. This may appear more clearly if we survey those subjects around which the present endeavours of classical studies may be said to centre in the sense that here the need for clarification is most urgent.

However, two general remarks have yet to be made. Firstly: The kind of research which attempts above all to point out the intrinsic continuity in the history of ideas responds to the very character of the intellectual pursuits of antiquity. There were no fissures, there was no *creatio ex nihilo*; new ideas grew organically from the old. From poetry and the traditions of wisdom as well as of technical skill there emerged philosophy. The problems of philosophy are handed down from generation to generation, and every philosopher takes issue with the theorems of his predecessors. Thus Anaxagoras starts out from Parmenides and the Atomist Leucippus in turn from Anaxagoras. The philosophies of Zeno and Epicurus are for long stretches occupied with disputations about Plato's 'science of the good' and about the *vita contemplativa* of Aristotle. To this we must add another peculiar feature. The culture of antiquity was to a remarkable extent a 'literary' culture. By this we mean the fact that ancient thought—in spite of its admirable directness and facility—has but rarely received its problems from 'the things themselves'. The questions of philosophy grew out of 'literature' to an extent which has not yet been fully appreciated. We may illustrate this with the example of ancient ethics which has

re-assumed particular significance in present-day philosophy. A great number of the most fundamental problems are laid out in the *Ethics* of Aristotle. But it would be an illusion to think that these problems had been suggested to him by the observation of human life itself. This is true only for the smaller part. Aristotle rather took the majority of these problems from the poetry of old: from the subject-matter of the Attic tragedy, from the casuistry which followed and thrived upon the 'classics' in the time of the Sophists and of Socrates. To what degree the entire ethical theory of the Greeks was influenced by the interpretation of verses from Hesiod or Euripidean 'cases' is a great question as yet hardly investigated. The same holds true, incidentally, for the philosophy of nature or physics; a considerable number of its theorems are not established by way of observation of the scientific object, but by the examination of literary texts from Homer down to versified rules on the weather.

The second point is this. While we may confidently assert the continuity in the evolution of philosophical problems, we must be all the more cautious when it comes to the application of the modern notion of psychological development to the individual philosophers. It was indeed a landmark in the history of research when it seemed possible to comprehend the evolution of thought of a Plato or Aristotle from childhood to old age. Many highly important insights have been gained in this way. But this approach as such has retained merely limited validity. One must remember that ancient man never had a conscious (historical) relation to himself. That juvenile works might be significant as documents of a certain stage of intellectual development—even if after forty years one would be writing and thinking in an entirely different way—this is an idea which has never occurred to the ancients. Ancient man experiences his individuality and his work definitely as a whole, as the homogeneous totality of a *bios*. If therefore Plato never renounced or destroyed his early works, it is because he felt that they did not essentially contradict his later works. The same holds true for Aristotle. The idea that Aristotle should have written the so-called Dialogues in his earlier years and more or less condemned them later on and that what we know of his works are the scientific works of his mature age having nothing to do either in form or content with his Dialogues—this opinion has been rightly rejected not long ago. Aristotle cannot possibly have looked upon his work in such manner. There can be no doubt that the Dialogues—whenever they were actually written—never lost their general validity for him, and his scientific works basically were meant to serve as supplements or illustrations to them. This does not

exclude the real existence of obvious contradictions between the Dialogues and the 'esoteric' texts. No matter what explanations are given—this one is impossible that Aristotle should have repudiated the formulations of his Dialogues in later years.

We now come to the main questions which under these presuppositions suggest themselves today. Again we shall endeavour to proceed methodically.

The most urgent need exists in a field which forms the basis for all work of this kind: texts. Oddly enough, it was just the generation of scholars which has done most for the historical interpretation of ancient philosophy which somehow stopped half way. The chief merit of historical interpretation appears above all when the interpreter takes into consideration as far as possible all texts as they have once existed rather than merely proceeding from more or less casually preserved texts. One will never understand the Socratics if one reads only Plato and Xenophon; it must constantly be kept in mind that beside these two there were also Antisthenes, Aristippus, Aeschines, and the others. It is quite mistaken (much as it happens) to neglect the later ones simply because their works have not been preserved but are only represented by scanty fragments.

Thus an interpretation claiming historical accuracy necessarily depends upon a most scrupulous and comprehensive collection of the fragments of lost philosophical works. Such collections were begun in the decades before World War I with great energy, but nothing has actually been completed. If indeed one may express a wish in this field, it would be the hope that a complete collection of the fragments of the ancient philosophers be compiled in international co-operation and in accordance with standardised rules. Thus we would receive a work of tremendous value as a source for the history of Western civilisation—a work which could not be ignored by systematic philosophy either.

We may illustrate the urgency of this task with a few details. In 1903 Hermann Diels gathered the fragments of the pre-Socratics in a collection which has remained a classic. This collection was intended as a selection for practical use at universities and has fulfilled this function with every new edition till today. However, without impairing the memory of Hermann Diels, one may say that this collection does not satisfy the needs of research at all. An entirely new collection should be made, comprising all that is relevant about the philosophy of the pre-Socratics down to the end of antiquity. A special collection ought to contain all traditions about Pythagoras and his followers. It is a calamity for the history of civilisation

that up to date no serious endeavour has been made to take up and analyse carefully the various layers of the tradition concerning Pythagoras.

As to the fragments of the Socratics, there is no collection whatever deserving this title. In this case, however, it would be necessary to investigate systematically the bulk of the ancient 'collections' of the utterances of the philosophers as well as of the anecdotes that were told about them. For these collections actually do go back in one form or another to the late hellenistic period. It would further be important to bring together all the 'anonymous traditions' about Socrates (which nobody seems yet to have thought of). Many a surprising contribution to the interpretation of Plato and Xenophon is sure to result from such an undertaking.

The fragments of the writings of Plato's pupils are scattered about in a number of monographs. Those of the late Platonics have never been gathered at all. The remainders of the works of Aristotle's pupils are being edited at present—for the first time according to modern principles. Unfortunately by far the most important among them, Theophrastus of Ephesus, is not included. His fragments have been assembled for the last time in 1862 in a notoriously careless manner. Worse yet is the fact that we are still lacking a revised modern edition of the remnants of Aristotle's lost works. The last edition dates from 1886. It is really paradoxical that the students of Aristotle are constantly concerned with the lost Dialogues, while no attempt is made to establish systematically the actually existing remnants of the Dialogues. Then it would turn out how extremely little we know about the individual Dialogues, sometimes hardly more than the title; however, the sum of the fragments would make the whole of the Dialogues much more tangible and comprehensive than one is inclined to think today. To work out a collection of this kind would, however, require a whole team of scholars.

The edition of the Epicurea by H. Usener in 1897 was itself a masterpiece—like that of the pre-Socratics by Diels. It is obsolete today but has not been replaced. The modern editions of Epicurean texts by C. Bailey in England and C. Diano in Italy are outstanding but intend only to give a selection. A complete collection would be needed in this field as well. This is all the more true with respect to the fragments of the Stoics. H. von Arnim's edition, a product of immense diligence, is poorly organised and not as dependable as one would like it to be. It is true that this work has a claim to leniency on the ground that there is hardly a more thankless task in the whole domain of ancient philosophy than the reconstruction of the writings and teachings of the great Stoics. The thought of a Zeno or

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Chrysippus (but as well of a Panaitius and Posidonius) has had such wide and complex influence that one may at times almost despair of ever recovering the real Zeno from the floods of the late Stoic literature.

This may suffice as an indication as to the first and most significant task of the history of ancient philosophy.

A second task, related to the first, is hardly less urgent; we mean the need for modern commentaries to the ancient philosophical texts. To annotate on classical authors is the oldest form of the study of literature. This particular form of occupation with the classical texts flourished in antiquity and lived on through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the middle of the last century. From then on it begins to die down. And indeed it has become evident that the kind of annotation as it was still in use a hundred years ago will no longer do to make a text really understandable. We mean those traditional devices as the explanation of words and subjects and the citation of parallel passages for both. A commentary as such is indispensable. For the classical studies are bound no less than the natural sciences to the rule that the general validity of results can only be established by a careful observation of the particular. Plato or Democritus must be verified in the actual wording of the text. Hence the kind of commentary we need should not be concerned primarily with grammatical and antiquarian oddities but should be centred on the development of thought. It is important to know the meaning of every sentence in itself and in its context. There have been a few un-co-ordinated efforts to establish such commentaries for Plato and Aristotle, but none as yet for the fragments of the other ancient philosophers. It is obvious that a modern collection of the fragments, for instance, of the pre-Socratics or the Socratics will be reliable and useful only when it is accompanied from the beginning by a commentary. This commentary can hardly be made too elaborate and comprehensive. Felix Jacoby's annotated edition of the fragments of the Greek historians may serve as a model for the methods to be used. This work may easily be called the greatest achievement in the field of classical studies during the last decades. Something of this sort is required for the philosophers. However, only a whole group of scholars working together would be able to tackle this job.

Beside these very far-reaching tasks which—if they are fulfilled—would only have laid the foundation for all future work, we may point to a number of specific problems.

There are five main points to be taken up.

The first concerns the origin of ancient philosophy. Philosophy, after

all, has not existed from the beginning of time, but it has come about at a definite moment in history and under certain conditions. It is so important to recognise these conditions because they will explain a number of elements which have become a constant and integral part of the concept of philosophy as such. The philosophy of nature thus contained from the outset two opposing tendencies. The one aimed at the constructive and speculative and was suggested and promoted by the old theogonies. The other direction endeavoured to explain particular paradoxical phenomena which, in part, stimulated intellectual curiosity, but in part also became the source of many disquieting superstitions. The philosophy of nature considered it its task to overcome the superstitions by rational hypotheses. It has thus taken on an element of 'enlightenment' which has remained characteristic of it ever since.

If we inquire into the origin of philosophical ethics, the essential problem is to find out how the bulk of that traditional informal wisdom which was there from the beginning, prior to philosophy, was transformed into rational systems. It is a long and complicated process in which ethics was organised, the speculative concept of the 'aim of life' was placed in the centre, and ethics detached itself from the particular political and social conditions and became valid for man as such. This process is least comprehended if one naïvely follows the ancient legend and has Socrates create philosophical ethics out of nothing, as it were, by a magic trick.

Even less do we know up to now about the origin and history of philosophical logics. We barely see the outline of its development from the pre-Socratic ontology (philosophy of the being). This ontology for the first time arrived at a whole metaphysical system through a compelling technique of reasoning based on the concept of pure *being*. This metaphysical world had nothing in common any more with the visible world that surrounds us. For half a century philosophy was entirely dominated by the speculative ontology of Parmenides. The categories of this ontology slowly emerged and separated from the 'whole' and were transformed into the categories of any particular. We only know in the most general outlines how this development actually took place.

Another important aggregate of questions is indicated by the names of Plato and Aristotle. Here too the most essential problems of interpretation are still open, questions regarding the intrinsic unity of the extensive work of either of the two philosophers, or the relation of Plato to his predecessors, or that of Aristotle to his. Two seemingly extraneous details illustrate best what stage the study of Plato and Aristotle has reached. We have

always known that Plato—apart from working on his philosophical dialogues—addressed the Athenian public in lectures on the nature of the ‘moral good’. Fragments of notes, taken by several of his listeners on these lectures, have been preserved. They allow us to see at least this much, that these lectures were an attempt to express the essence of Plato’s philosophy in a most comprehensive and at the same time most abstract form. Perhaps in all philosophical literature of antiquity there has not been a more venerable text, a more daring search of a strong and subtle mind for the meaning of existence. But the students of philosophy—so it seems—have not found time yet to look into these texts more seriously. The works of Leon Robin, Julius Stenzl, Paul Wilpert, many merits as they have, can be considered only the first attempts at an interpretation.

As to Aristotle, we also have known for a long time that the works that established his fame in Antiquity were by no means those so-called school-texts but a group of artistically composed writings for a general public in part in the form of dialogues. In these writings all those problems are treated elaborately which are dealt with so briefly in the ‘school-texts’ for the very reason that Aristotle could refer to his general writings, e.g., for the teachings about the Divine, the spirit, the *vita contemplativa*. Reminders of these works and of the teachings they contain are to be found all over ancient literature. However, they have not yet been collected systematically.

The third problem area is concerned with the origin of the Hellenistic philosophy. The main question can be formulated as follows: How is it possible that after Plato and Aristotle, i.e., after the two philosophers who to us represent the climax of ancient philosophy, we find such philosophers as Zenon and Epicurus who are—at least at a first glance—ininitely more primitive? How could it happen that a highly spiritualistic and fundamentally theistic philosophy could be overcome by such materialistic philosophies with a most vague concept of God? This problem is not an easy one. It is necessary to indicate clearly not only what the Stoa and what Epicurus have learned from Plato and Aristotle, but also: what were the weak points in the philosophies of the latter two which made this victory of the Hellenistic systems possible? It would be a superficial explanation to say that this victory was won by accident; it is, on the contrary, both meaningful, and in a sense justified. Our task it is to find its meaning and justification. The brilliant studies of Ettore Bignone about the relation of Epicurus to Aristotle have in a sense pointed the way which the investigation will have to follow.

The fourth problem is the transition from the multiplicity of the Hellenistic philosophies to the Neoplatonism of late antiquity. Here, too, we come upon a phenomenon of great general interest. How does it happen that a great number of widely different systems and philosophical ways of life go out of existence, unnoticed almost, and that the contrasts of their doctrines suddenly become uninteresting and all effort is once more directed toward universal syntheses? And how, in turn, does Neoplatonism, in which speculative construction and hieratic pathos are combined, emerge? So far there have been two significant contributions to this field of investigation—the fascinating books of Karl Reinhardt about Posidonius, and an outstanding and important work by the Swiss W. Theiler.

In this connexion we might point out that in the later Neoplatonic writings of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., which are quite voluminous and preserved for the greater part, we have a piece of ancient philosophy which is literally ‘unknown’ to this moment. Of the last great systematic work of Neoplatonism (and that means, the last of all ancient philosophy), viz., the six books of the ‘Platonic Theology’ of Proclus, there has been but one printed edition, dating from the first half of the seventeenth century. This may give a hint to what extent these works, which were written on the threshold of the Middle Ages and which are as inaccessible in contents as they are as books, have been neglected.

The last problem, finally, is how ancient philosophy came to an end. Here again, the same thing holds true as before in regard to the victory of the Hellenistic philosophies over Plato and Aristotle: the victory of Christianity is not an extraneous accident. Ancient philosophy of itself was ready to go down. Certainly, this fact should not be interpreted rashly. It is not a matter of course that historical life should leap from the Neoplatonic systems to Christianity which itself was a philosophical movement.

But may this survey suffice. Our intention was to point out what long distance the study of ancient philosophy has yet to go before we can claim to have an adequate understanding of its development. Insignificant details may become important much to our surprise, and many old legends and prejudices will have to be overcome. But the effort will not be in vain. For the rise of philosophical thought in time is a unique and marvellous spectacle. It is moreover necessary for our present philosophy. History, it is true, gives no more definite and complete answers in the field of philosophy than it does in any other field. But unless philosophy is seen in the light of history, it runs the risk of becoming empty talk. Yet without a firmly grounded philosophy we cannot exist.